DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 505 CS 014 448

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TITLE Young People's Reading Interests in South Africa.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Cross Cultural Studies; *Developing Nations; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Pilot Projects; Questionnaires; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Habits; *Reading Interests; Student Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *South Africa

ABSTRACT

The Children's Literature Research Unit at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, implemented a research project examining what young people were reading at the end of the 20th century, similar to a research project which had been carried out at Roehampton Institute in London (1996). The research began with a pilot project. Its goals were to: understand the relationship between reading of and attitudes toward a range of topical social issues; examine ways in which children and young adults encounter reading and choose what to read; provide information about reading habits and information use in the context of different ages, gender, class, ethnic background, geographical location and educational phases. The project's final goal was to discern between conventional forms of reading (printed matter) and new developments in the presentation of and interactions with text (including audio tapes, CD-ROMs and Internet). The sample for the pilot project was drawn from primary school students (grades 5, 6, and 7) in eight schools and secondary school learners (grades 8, 9, and 10) in five English-medium schools in the Gauteng Province (South Africa). A questionnaire was answered by 696 boys and 707 girls in primary schools and by 462 boys and 415 girls in secondary schools. Results were not that different from the survey carried out in Roehampton which means that what children are interested in reading in South Africa is not radically different from what children are interested in reading in England. However, children aged between 7-11, representing those from the primary schools, showed high interest in reading religious works, which differed from the results of the Roehampton study. Furthermore, South African children showed a relative lack of interest in comics as compared with respondents from England. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

ED 455 505

YOUNG PEOPLE'S READING INTERESTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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YOUNG PEOPLE'S READING INTERESTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Children's Literature Research Centre, Roehampton Institute in London, UK, carried out a research project which examined what young people are reading at the end of the 20th century. This resulted in the publication of *Young people's reading at the end of the century* (1996). Following the success of the British based study, researchers from Roehampton proposed that similar studies be conducted in other countries, such as South Africa. The Children's Literature Research Unit (CLRU) in the Department of Information Science at the University of South Africa, Pretoria agreed to implement the research project, beginning with a pilot project. In this paper I will discuss the findings of this pilot project.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The goals incorporated into the South African pilot study were to understand the relationship between reading and attitudes to a range of topical social issues; examine the ways in which children and young adults encounter and choose what to read; provide information about the reading habits and information use of different ages, gender, class, ethnic background, geographical location and educational phase and discern between conventional forms of reading (printed matter) and new developments in the presentation of and interactions with text (including audio tapes, CD-ROMs and Internet).

The sample for the pilot project was drawn from primary school learners (Grades 5, 6 and 7) in eight schools and secondary school learners (Grades 8, 9, 10) in five English-medium schools[1] in the Gauteng Province.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the limitations of the study is that while every effort was made to ensure that the sample used in the study was representative of the general population of South Africa in terms of racial composition, the respondents were all from one urban area, namely Pretoria. It was impossible to include rural areas in the study due to budget constraints.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data collection technique: questionnaires

Dr. Kimberly Reynolds of The Children's Research Centre, Roehampton Institute, UK provided the CLRU with a copy of each of the questionnaires used for the key

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[1] Afrikaans schools were not included because a Master's student in the Department of Information Science is carrying out the survey in Afrikaans-speaking schools in South Africa.

stages in their research project. Three key stages were identified: keystage 1 (4-7 years); keystage 2 (7-11 years); keystage 3-4 (11-16 years) for the Roehampton project. However, we only used respondents in key stages 2, 3 and 4 as children in key stage 1 would have required too much assistance to fill in the questionnaires.

The questionnaires were modified for use with South African learners. Some of the terminology which we felt would not be understood was changed, for example, "newsagents" was changed to "supermarkets" and "films" to "movies". We also added questions which were considered essential to understanding aspects of literacy in South Africa, for example, questions on oral traditions and language preferences were added.

DETAILS OF RESPONDENTS

Primary school (key stage 2) survey details

The sample selected for this phase of the pilot study consisted of eight schools and 1433 respondents. Of the completed questionnaires 30 had to be discarded. The final sample of valid questionnaires came to 1403.

Total number of boys: 696
Total number of girls: 707

Ages:

9:	47
10:	194
11:	394
12:	374
13:	235
14:	132
15:	20
16:	7

Grades:

5:	523
6:	567
7:	201

Missing cases: 112

Languages spoken at home other than English:

Afrikaans:	59	Venda:	7
Zulu:	96	Ndebele:	53
Xhosa:	33	Tswana:	206
N. Sotho:	704	none:	59
other:	38		

Missing cases: 148

Religion:

Christianity:	1031	Hinduism:	84
Islam:	37	African Traditional:	104

Buddhism:	9	other:	42
Judaism:	10		
Missing cases:	86		

Secondary schools (key stage 3)

The sample selected for this phase of the pilot project consisted of five schools and 958 respondents. Of the completed questionnaires, 81 had to be discarded. The final sample of valid questionnaires totalled 877.

Total number of boys: 462
Total number of girls: 415

Ages

12:	7
13:	106
14:	263
15:	244
16:	247

Grades

8:	344
9:	308
10:	190

Languages spoken at home other than English:

Afrikaans:	153	Venda:	10
Zulu:	74	Ndebele:	10
Xhosa:	14	Tswana:	181
Sotho:	166	none:	85
other:	147		

Religion:

Christianity:	668	Hinduism:	51
Islam:	65	African Traditional:	52
Buddhism:	2	other:	8
Judaism:	3		

KEY FINDINGS

Choosing books

In choosing books Illustrations were the most important factor influencing choice. It is surprising that illustrations still play such an important role in respondent's choice of books because at this age they should be moving away from picture books. One of the reasons for children's reluctance to read may be that there are insufficient numbers of books with illustrations for this age group. Illustrations can support readers, and in South Africa where many children are reading in a second language

and come from families with minimal literacy, it is possible that they need every kind of support they can get if they are to develop the reading habit and become expert readers. It seems possible that the lack of books with illustrations for this age group contributes to a low level of voluntary reading.

A frequently mentioned factor influencing the choice of key stage 3 respondents is the appearance of the cover. Publishers are very aware of the importance of the cover in attracting readers. Libraries, unfortunately often cover books or have older editions of books on their shelves which no longer look attractive and modern. This may deter children from reading books that they would find enjoyable. Librarians and teachers should be aware of this problem.

Aspects of the cover which plays an increasingly important role in the process of choosing books as learners mature, are the blurb, and other pieces of writing such as extracts from reviews. It should be ensured that when books are covered for library usage that these parts of the cover are not lost.

Other factors which key stage 3 respondents say affect their choice of which books to read are: the title; personal recommendations; and whether a book is linked to a TV programme or film. The link to a television programme or film is more important for boys than for girls. A factor that increases in importance as respondents get older is the author. (The author was an unimportant factor for key stage 2 respondents when choosing a book, but it was important for key stage 3 respondents.) Shared reading also becomes increasingly important as girls mature. Someone's recommendation was the second most influential factor in choosing a book for girls in key stage 3.

A relatively important factor for key stage 2 respondents and boys in key stage 3 is whether or not the book is written in their home language. This plays a less important role for girls in key stage 3 who are happy to read a book in English.

As mentioned book covers play an important role in young people's selection of books. For children in key stage 2 the most significant aspect of the cover for girls is the picture whereas, for boys it is bright colours. As the children get older a modern or up-to-date look becomes more important. This comprises more general aspects, such as style, design and typography.

Interestingly, respondents do not seem to be particularly concerned that books should reflect their own particular environment or have characters that are similar to themselves in terms of race, religion or home country. These questions were only included in the questionnaire for key stage 3. None of the options relating to sex, colour, or country of origin appear to be "important" or "very important" to a significant number of respondents. Those factors which reflect contemporaneity (living at the same time, sharing the same interests and being the same age) scored considerably higher. Being the same age was more important to girls than to boys.

CHOOSING COMICS AND MAGAZINES

The range of questions asked about the process of choosing comics and magazines duplicated those asked about choosing books. Comics, were not very popular with the respondents and many skipped the questions in this section. One of the reasons for this may be that the majority of the comics for sale in South Africa are imported and have a western orientation. The humour, attitudes and values may not be accessible or interesting to South African children. Not surprisingly, given the highly visual nature of comics, the major reason given for choosing comics was the "pictures inside" (except for key stage 3 girls for whom the name and the way it looks were more important).

For key stage 2 readers the only other two reasons for which a significant percentage of respondents indicated "often" or "very often" were the categories name and value for money. As readers get older there was a far lower percentage of respondents who indicated "often" or "very often" for any of the other categories especially the girls. The name was the only other category for which more than 50% of the respondents indicated "often" or "very often". More than 50% of the boys indicated "often" or "very often" for the categories good value for money; and the way it looks. Boys appear to be more avid comic readers than girls when they get older.

Magazines are more popular with respondents than comics. Nearly a third of key stage 2 respondents replied "lots" when asked how much time they spent reading magazines. (Almost 20% of respondents indicated they "never" read comics.) Magazines are very popular with key stage 3 girls. When asked how much time they spend reading magazines over 40% indicated "lots". Although not as popular with boys, 17% of them also indicated "lots". Comics are much less popular with only 15% of the boys and 18% of the girls indicating "lots".

For those respondents from key stage 2 who did reply, the four main reasons given for choosing magazines were: value for money; the name; famous face on the cover; and the way it looks. For those respondents from key stage 3 who did reply, the three categories for which the highest percentage of respondents indicated "often" and "very often" were confined primarily to the following categories: the way it looks; the pictures inside; and good value for money. Visual elements also play an important role in choice of magazines.

READING OF FICTION

Many of the findings from this survey differ from those of Children's Literature Research Centre (1996) in Roehampton in terms of reading fiction. Although adventure stories were very popular, school and religious stories were more popular with the key stage 2 respondents. The reason for the popularity of religious stories may be that religion plays an important role in many of the respondent's lives. Until the change of government in 1994 the South African education policy was that of Christian National Education with a heavy emphasis on religion. It is possible that

many of the books available at schools have a religious theme and these are the stories to which the respondents have primarily been exposed. In the series of questions asking respondents how much time they spend reading for fun, one of the questions specifically asks respondents how much time they spend reading scriptures, prayer books etc. for fun most weeks. (This question was not included in the questionnaire for key stage 3.) The most frequent response from both boys and girls from key stage 2 was "lots". This confirms the popularity of this type of text for this group of respondents.

Adventure stories were the third most popular category for both boys and girls from key stage 2. Adventure stories are generally very popular with this age group. Appleyard (1990) asserts that children between the ages of seven and twelve predominantly read adventure stories or books that we can loosely call "adventure", because this label can be applied to a considerable range of stories. He believes that the major reason children of this age like these stories is the combination of sameness and diversity that is common to the adventure genre. The conventionality of the plots, characters and values are what ten- or eleven-year-olds expect to find in stories. This type of story is satisfying to this age group because this is largely how the world looks as far as they have succeeded in putting it together for themselves (Appleyard 1990: 85). The importance of these factors in the choice of stories is evidenced in the popularity of series books with this age group which become less popular as children mature.

It is interesting that horror stories, a genre that is very popular overseas (Children's Literature Research Unit 1996: 211), is not very popular with South African children. Only 35% of the boys and 28% of the girls in key stage 2 indicated that they read this type of fiction "often" or "very often". This genre enjoys more popularity with older respondents from key stage 3 where 42% of the boys and 36% of the girls indicated the options "often" or "very often" but it does not share the high level of popularity that it has overseas. One of the reasons for this may be the high level of crime and violence in South Africa. Children may feel that they need to literature that helps them escape from the all too real dangers that they face everyday.

Gender differences in choice of types of fiction read are far more obvious in key stage 3. This is hardly surprising as the formation of a "self-conscious sense of identity" is influenced by the bodily changes of puberty and by the need to imagine acceptable versions of adult maleness and femaleness (Appleyard 1990: 99). Girls' increased interest in romantic fiction is linked with their maturation and increased interest in relationships with the opposite sex. Boys, who tend to mature later than girls and have less interest in relationships, are far less interested in books of a romantic nature.

The appeal of the adventure genre dropped significantly for girls and boys as they grow older although boys still rate adventures relatively highly. (It was the fourth highest category for boys compared to the seventh highest category for girls in key stage 3.) Appleyard (1990) suggests that as readers grow older, they become more interested in character, they therefore begin to look for stories with greater depth

and complexity. They want stories that will illuminate intentions, motives and points of view, and how they might conflict even in well-meaning people. The stories that satisfied them when they were younger no longer work for them as adolescents.

There is a marked fall-off in the percentage of respondents that indicate the options "often" or "very often" in response to the question on how much time they spend reading fiction for pleasure from key stage 2 to key stage 3. This is consistent with research elsewhere which indicates that most teenagers do not read much voluntarily. When they do read for pleasure they tend to read for short periods. Younger children tend to read more frequently for enjoyment (Appleyard 1990:99).

INFORMATION BOOKS

Attitudes to reading information books

Respondents were asked how often they read information books or other nonfiction and whether they read these books for pleasure; to help with their homework; or because they want to find out things for themselves.

More than 50% of all respondents said that they read such books, at least "sometimes". Generally more boys than girls claimed to read information books "very often", "often" or "sometimes". However, in nearly all instances the figures for girls were still above 60%. This suggests that girls have more interest in factual material than is often thought. In fact, in key stage 3 more boys than girls say that they never read information books. It is of concern that 11% of boys and 9% of the girls in key stage 3 indicate this. One would have thought that by this stage in their schooling respondents were regularly consulting and reading non-fiction sources for homework, even if they did not read it out of interest.

There is little difference between genders in the reasons given for reading non-fiction. Homework is the main reason given for all respondents except for girls in key stage 3. The main reason given by them is reading to find things out for themselves.

Subject choice

In terms of subject choice the most frequently selected single category for boys in both key stage 2 and 3 was sport. Girls read considerably less on sport with their reading on this topic peaking at 53% in key stage 2.

The interest in material on "animals and plants" displayed by respondents in key stage 2 diminishes considerably in key stage 3 as does the interest in reading biographical material. Gender difference was most marked, as to be expected, on the subject of machines, with the figures for girls showing a consistent decline from 41% in key stage 2 to 8% in key stage 3. Interest by girls in the categories how things work; and stars and outer space also decreased from key stage 2 to key stage 3, while boys' interest maintained a level above 40%. Figures on subjects such as religion and the rest of the world were not notably divergent in terms of

gender and age, but [illegible]se on the topic of about how your body works showed considerable divergence in key stage 3 though not in key stage 2. Girls in key stage 3 show considerable more interest than boys in reading about body changes. This higher interest by girls compared to boys (28% compared to 12% chose "very often") is also reflected in the responses to questions in the section of the questionnaire that dealt with health and changes in the body. It was also interesting that respondents in key stage 2 were far more interested in reading about religion than respondents in key stage 3. This correlates with their high interest in reading fiction on the same topic.

Kinds of texts

There are three categories for which there are gender differences for the kinds of texts read and these occurred only in key stage 3. The categories for which there are differences between the genders are magazines, computers and activity books. Magazines and activity books are more popular with girls than with boys and computers are slightly less popular. Activity books are a less demanding format and this may be the reason why this type of format is more popular with girls. Magazines tend to present information in a more accessible manner (for example true life stories), and may be more popular with girls for this reason. It is unfortunate that girls are less enthusiastic than boys about computers as they get older and perhaps teachers need to address this issue. This finding about girls' lack of interest in computers is similar to findings elsewhere, such as Australia (Spreadbury 2000). Boys engagement with computers may result from playing computer games which tend to relate more to boys' interests than those of girls. As a result girls may be more reluctant than boys to use computers for other activities.

The enthusiasm for the categories: lists of facts; magazines; encyclopaedias and computers all increased with age. Except for magazines, these forms are all more difficult to read and use than activity books and books with lots of pictures so one would expect interest to increase as respondents became more adept at using these different formats.

Encyclopaedias are the least popular form of factual reading and magazines the most appealing for respondents in both key stages 2 and 3.

Reading strategies

In order to use information material effectively one normally uses the index and table of contents in order to make a preliminary survey. As learners become more proficient readers they should increasingly show signs of using these strategies and a corresponding decrease in the use of less effective strategies like reading every word. The responses to the questions on reading strategies such as asking respondents if they read every word; if they look at the index and contents for guidance; should indicate whether respondents are developing the necessary strategies to use information material effectively.

In general the increasing use of these strategies as respondents mature is more notable than any gender differences although more boys in key stage 3 read every word compared to girls (33% of boys compared to 23% of girls). The practice of looking through a book and choosing the interesting sections also increases with age. This can be seen as a kind of preliminary survey of the material unlike looking mainly at the pictures. Boys show a marginally greater preference than girls for looking at pictures which may be linked with the frequently observed association of verbal abilities with females and spatial with males (Children's Literature Research Unit 1996:218). However this difference is so small that it is difficult to really draw any conclusions from it.

In conclusion boys' preference for sport across both age groups, girls' dislike of machines and girls' interest in reading about body changes in key stage 3 are the most clear gender differences in looking at the reading and use of non-fiction material. In general, the study reveals that there is less female resistance to reading information books and fewer differences between girls' and boys' interests than has sometimes been thought. However, there is also a less positive attitude towards computers by girls than that evidenced by boys in key stage 3. The study also reveals that there are too many learners of both sexes and all ages who have a reluctance to read books of a factual nature, and that even at sixteen many learners have not yet worked out effective strategies for dealing with factual texts.

RELUCTANT READERS

Respondents in key stage 3 were asked what sort of readers they are. The percentages show that the majority of respondents indicate that they are average readers (59% of girls and boys). Unfortunately research in South Africa indicates that respondents are often not capable of evaluating their reading ability. In general the low level of reading skills is recognised as a problem in South Africa. The problem is so urgent that Kader Asmal (the Minister of Education) has declared 2001 the "Year of the Reader" in hopes of motivating all South Africans to read more and to help improve reading skills in South Africa. In tests done on a small group of preschool children by the Children's Literature Research Unit, it was found that most of these children did not yet possess the most basic emergent literacy skills such as recognising which way to hold a book or to turn pages even after having spent a whole term in grade 1.

It is also a matter of concern as to how few respondents in key stage 3 are enthusiastic readers. Few respondents from key stage 3 spend time reading for fun and there is greater divergence between girls and boys where almost double the percentage of girls indicated "lots" compared to boys (5% of the boys and 12% of the girls). Responses in all sections (books, comics, magazines and newspapers) indicate that girls read more than boys in both key stage 2 and 3. Research overseas indicates that girls are better readers than boys and are achieving better results both at school, tertiary educational institutions and in work situations (Children's Literature Research Centre 1996: 220; Thistleton-Martin 1997). It is speculated that one of the major reasons for this is that girls are better readers than

boys. It is therefore important for teachers to take note of these findings which indicate a similar situation in South Africa and make every effort to encourage boys to read more.

READING ABOUT THE BODY, SEX, PREGNANCY, AIDS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE[2]

One of the most important findings of this survey is that adolescents value reading because it allows them private and controlled access to information which they trust about sensitive subjects such as pregnancy. This trust in printed information is apparent in those sections of the questionnaire which cover "Reading About Your Body", "Reading About Social Issues", and "Reading About Drugs, Alcohol and Solvent Abuse". Young people generally trust printed material and believe that it can and does help them understand themselves, others, and the problems they encounter as they mature. This is evident from the responses to questions such as: Does reading help you understand your body?; Does reading help you understand the problem other people may have with their bodies? and Has reading about topics such as [bullying, marriage, love/romance, divorce, stepparents, work money, unemployment, homelessness, crime, violence] ever helped you to solve a personal problem?

Respondents in key stage 3 overwhelmingly indicate that reading helps them understand their bodies; could help them understand the problems other people have with their bodies; and has already helped them to solve a personal problem. One possible reason for the positive attitude to reading is because reading is a private activity and does not expose ignorance. African culture also does not encourage open discussion about sexual issues with parents. Young people's reluctance to discuss these topics was indicated in the section of the questionnaire which asked respondents about non-textual sources of information about the body. Mothers are the most frequently consulted non-textual source but even they are consulted "very often" by only 25% of the boys and 36% of the girls.

An important aspect which is indicated by the survey, is the extent to which reading simultaneously provides information and the opportunity for adolescents to anticipate experiences and mentally to rehearse their responses so that they feel prepared and more able to make informed decisions at important moments (Children's Literature Research Unit 1996:225). The value they place on reading generally can be deduced from responses to specific questions; particularly their reactions to the following statement: "Stories/novels encourage readers to think about characters, behaviour, circumstances, actions and consequences in ways which can help them prepare for decisions in their own lives". The majority of respondents "agree" or "strongly agree" with this statement. If we accept that reading helps to prepare adolescents for situations and problems that they may

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[2] This section of the questionnaire was only given to respondents in key stage 3.

encounter and that it helps them make important decisions, non-readers may be significantly disadvantaged when it comes to evaluating risks and deciding what to do or how to behave in new situations as they mature (Children's Literature Research Unit 1996:225).

The questionnaire asked young people about the role of reading in relation to a large number of topical issues — from bullying and divorce through to AIDS and pregnancy. Examination of the responses to these sections of the questionnaire shows that more girls read about most of these topics than boys do. However, one area about which boys do appear to read at least as much as girls do is drugs and smoking.

According to their responses to the questionnaire, the kinds of material young people find most helpful when reading about substance abuse are magazines, followed by health pamphlets and then information books for boys and novels for girls. Science books are the least popular source for girls whereas novels are for boys. Again, it is obvious that magazines are the major source of information for most adolescents.

The kinds of messages conveyed in the material that young people read concerning drugs leads most of them to conclude that using drugs is "dangerous" (70% of the boys and 67% of the girls), "harmful" (57% of the boys and girls) and "related to crime" (62% of the boys and 74% of the girls).

One of the major difference between girls' and boys' reading is the amount of magazine reading done by girls. As has been apparent in every aspect of the questionnaire relating to personal development and problem solving, girls read magazines far more than do boys. There are far more girls' and women's magazines available that deal with these issues. It is possible that greater access to this kind of material would increase the extent to which reading influences boys. Also girls show a definite preference for narrative structure as compared to boys. Information in magazines on these topics is often presented in narrative form (true life stories) and this also may be a reason why this format is popular with girls.

It can be concluded from analysis of the data that reading conveys a positive message to adolescents on issues that are problematic and of major concern at this important stage in their lives. This is an important source of information and a way that can be used by society to influence adolescents' attitudes. Adolescents are often reluctant to obtain information on sensitive topics from people close to them. Non-textual sources of information are not frequently used. The most popular non-textual source of information was mothers and only 24% of the boys and 36% of the girls indicated that they consulted them "very often". However, what also needs to be taken into account is that even though the majority of respondents are deriving positive messages from what they read, there is still a small percentage of respondents for whom reading about substance abuse makes them want to experiment with drugs. They believe from their reading that taking drugs is exciting, that it is the way to meet people and keep friends. The message that drugs are

expensive and harmful is also not being conveyed. In general, the effects of reading are positive but there are obviously a small percentage of adolescents who are vulnerable and are affected negatively by material that they read. It is possible that more mediation is required and books and other material that deal with these topics should be discussed by teachers, counsellors and parents.

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

In discussing books and reading in relation to children one can no longer ignore the alternative formats such as audio books and electronic media. Electronic books and audio-cassettes provide reading contexts which demand complex and different modes of literacy; modes which are often deftly negotiated by children (Children's Literature Research Unit 1996:231).

When respondents were asked about different formats in which factual information can be presented, boys and girls almost consistently favour magazines, though computers are second in place for respondents from key stage 3. Respondents from key stage 2 were less enthusiastic about using computers. It appears that information in electronic form (either CD ROMS or from the Internet) has an evolving place in the child's reading experience and gains popularity as the child matures. However, one also needs to examine how important the computer is in the context of other activities and in particular reading. Approximately a third of the respondents from key stage 2 indicated that they spent "lots" of time reading most weeks. Their responses in the section of the questionnaire that dealt with after school activities indicated that they spent less time on computers than reading and that a far higher percentage of respondents spend no time on computers than do not read. Respondents in key stage 3 spend far less time reading for fun than respondents in key stage 2. There is also a greater divergence between girls and boys — almost double the number of girls read "lots" compared to boys (5% of the boys and 12% of the girls). A far higher percentage of boys than girls in key stage 3 spend time on the computer and the time spent on the computer is greater than that spent reading. This does not necessarily mean that they are reading on the computer. It probably means that they spend more time playing computer games. However, this familiarity with computers and positive attitude is likely to stand them in good stead in later life where more boys than girls move into computer-related careers (Thistleton-Martin 1997).

South Africa has a strong oral tradition. It has been postulated that the vibrancy of the oral tradition has had a negative affect on the development of a reading tradition amongst blacks in South Africa (French 1988) because the privacy and isolation of reading cannot compete with the fun and immediacy of the social interaction involved in oral story telling.

Audio-cassettes do not fulfil the same function as traditional oral narratives but changing life styles has resulted in the gradual disappearance of the oral tradition (at least in urban areas) (Machet & Olën 1997) and it was thought that audio-cassettes might partially fill the gap left by parents and grandparents no longer

telling stories to children. Story telling is an important feature of early childhood and audio-cassettes give children the opportunity to listen at will, an opportunity perhaps otherwise denied by the busy lives led by many of today's parents and caregivers.

Audio-cassettes are popular with the majority of key stage 2 respondents. More than 60% of the respondents say they listen to audio tapes. However, In key stage 3 this number drops considerably and we find that there is a significant difference between the sexes: more girls (43%) listen to cassette tapes than boys (28%). It is interesting that these findings mirror the findings on how much time is spent on reading for pleasure. Key stage 2 respondents appear to enjoy narrative in a variety of forms whereas for older respondents other activities become more important, especially those approved of and shared by their peer group such as listening to music, watching television and spending time with friends. If one looks at after school activities, listening to audio books was amongst the least favourite activities for key stage 3 respondents. Another factor could be that listening to stories is likely to be part of the younger child's classroom experience (and, therefore, the oral rendering of stories is more familiar). The adolescent is unlikely to have this experience at school and may regard such an activity as childish.

Film, television and radio play an important role in children's lives and the first two have an important influence on children's reading. The amount of time watching television seems to remain relatively constant as children get older and there is also little divergence between the sexes. Girls watch marginally more television than boys. Research elsewhere indicates that children who watch a lot of television are also often enthusiastic readers (Children's Literature Research Unit 1996). Television appears to be a relatively important factor in motivating respondents from key stage 2 to choose a book but is less influential with respondents from key stage 3. Film or television versions of books often influence children to read the book version and tie ins are very popular. It cannot be concluded that television necessarily has a negative affect on reading.

It can be concluded that electronic versions of books whether audio, film, television or computer versions, do not yet show any signs of replacing traditional text. Printed books are still able to stimulate the imagination of all age groups, though boys display less enthusiasm for them than girls. Magazines are still the most popular source of information. Technological development complements and enhances the reading environment but does not replace the traditional book. Many South African children still have little exposure to electronic books in the form of CD-ROMs on computers compared to children in western countries where many homes and schools have computers. This may account in some part for the relatively low percentages of children who indicated that they use computers compared to the survey carried out by the Children's Literature Research Centre in England (1996:236).

Audio cassettes are relatively unpopular with adolescents but provide for the needs and interests of younger children where they replace and supplement reading aloud by parents or teachers.

MAGAZINES, COMICS AND NEWSPAPERS

Magazines are undoubtedly one of the most popular forms of reading matter across genders and age groups. The reasons for this may be that they are ubiquitous, easily obtainable, and accessible. They are frequently borrowed from parents (indicating that they are readily available in the home). Their popularity is also indicated by the fact that a relatively high proportion of respondents are prepared to buy them for themselves.

Comics are far less popular in spite of the fact that they consist predominantly of visual material which respondents have indicated is very important for them. It is possible, as already stated, that the reason for their lack of popularity is the dearth of indigenous titles.

Younger children in key stage 2 seem relatively unfamiliar with newspapers but usage increases with age. Respondents from key stage 3 are beginning to consult newspapers not only for the children's section (although that remains popular) but also to read stories and the news. Again this is done by more girls than boys.

CONCLUSION

It is interesting that the results of this survey were not that different from the survey carried out by the Children's Literature Unit (1996) which means that what children are interested in reading in South Africa is not radically different from children in England. The differences that stand out in particular are the high interest of children in key stage 2 in reading religious works (both fiction and non-fiction). This is an anomaly. This interest is not evidenced in respondents in key stage 3. The other difference that stands out is the relative lack of interest in comics as compared with respondents from England. This is most unusual and can only be explained by a lack of suitable and appealing material in this form.

Of particular interest, also, are responses from key stage 3 respondents which indicated that race of main characters was not a major factor in their choice of what to read. There has been some debate on this issue (Machet 1992; Radebe 1995) and it is interesting to see these responses. It must be kept in mind that this may not apply to younger children. Research shows (Saracho & Dayton 1991;Shelley-Robinson 1996) that younger children are more interested in reading books which portray characters of the same race and ethnicity as the reader.

We still live in a text-based society, and in order to succeed, it is necessary to be a fluent reader. The only way to become a fluent reader is to read extensively. Learners who fail to become proficient readers — which means more than just being able to decode letters and recognise words — are unlikely to do well at school or after school. Moreover they are likely to be less flexible in their ability to solve problems, and are generally less exposed to new ideas and experiences than are those who read with ease. Reading and the ability to find and use information effectively are basic conditions for survival in the 21st century (Bruce 1995; Sayed &

de Jager 1997). Reading is a core competency in the knowledge society of the new millennium. Electronic media, such as the Internet, require a higher level of literacy than traditional textual literacy. Thus children who do not have a relatively high level of literacy will be permanently disadvantaged in their future lives. It is essential if we are to turn new or reluctant readers into fluent, voluntary readers to understand and have insight into the needs and interests of young readers. Once children can read fluently, finding something for them to read which is rewarding and allows them to experience the pleasure of reading is crucial if we are to turn them into lifetime readers.

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